

## TOWARD A POST-MODERN REFORMED POLITY

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The Book of Acts describes the birth of the Christian church during and immediately after Pentecost. Once the wind of the Spirit had birthed the new fellowship, the disciples met and “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer” (Acts 2:42). It was not long, however, before the fellowship began to experience the difficulties of growth and success and the necessity for some form of organization and polity (Acts 6). Adaptation to changing circumstances is always a challenge to the Church of Jesus Christ.”

Many “mainline” denominations, including The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (“PCUSA”), in which the author is a pastor, face declining membership and disintegrating pressures as a result of changes in the society and the issues involving theology, morals and church organization. There have been continual conflicts over doctrine and morals within all the mainline denominations. In the Reformed tradition, leaders on all sides of the conflict quote selected passages from Calvin, either in support of their position or in opposition to the positions of their opponents. This is natural, for Calvin is the source of much Reformed theology. Yet, we need to do more than use Calvin as a source of proof texts for our positions.

This article focuses on those aspects of Calvin’s thought which are pertinent to a better understanding of how Reformed churches might respond to current problems, and what kind of a church we might attempt to build. It is written from the perspective of one who desires to find some method of adapting mainline Reformed bodies to the conditions of post-modernity so that they may make a vital witness to Jesus Christ into the twenty-first century.

### PART 1: CALVIN AND THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

1. *The Necessity of the Church.* For Calvin, the visible church is a necessary aid to human salvation. It is an “outward help” needed for faith to begin and grow. The church is like a mother, “into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they are mature and at last reach the goal of

faith" (4.1.1).<sup>1</sup> Though God is not bound to the outward means of the church, he has bound believers to the church as the ordinary vehicle through which faith is "caught and taught" (4.1.5). The church is, in other words, a necessary institution. People need the church because it is in and through the church that faith is nurtured. Through the ministry of the church we receive the witness of the gospel that leads to faith. Through the ministry of the church godliness is cultivated (4.1.4). The church is so necessary for the Christian life that, "it is always disastrous to leave the church" (4.1.4).

Faith ordinarily results from the ministry of a local church as the mother of the faithful (4.1.4). Like a mother who raises wise children, the church is necessary as a "school of faith" (4.1.5). God desires believers to grow to spiritual maturity under the care and guidance of the church (4.1.5). The Holy Spirit, by blessing the church with the spiritual giftedness of believers, has provided for the nurture of faith (4.1.5). Calvin's emphasis on pure doctrine and the marks of the church flows from his concern for maintaining the church as a pure school of faith and godliness. For the church to perform its function as the "mother of the faithful," it must teach the apostolic faith in accordance with sound doctrine. Otherwise, its members and their children are not equipped to embody the gospel as properly formed disciples of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> Unless the gospel is preached and taught in accordance with sound doctrine, people have difficulty coming to faith or growing in discipleship. Therefore, for Calvin, right doctrine is crucial for the proper functioning of the church as the mother of the faithful.<sup>3</sup>

Much contemporary evangelicalism sees the church as a sort of "spiritual social compact theory". In this way of thinking, the church is simply a collection of individuals with a personal relationship with Christ who have joined together to meet their religious needs. This way of thinking about the church is foreign to Calvin. The church, rightly conceived, is not an optional institution. It is the central place where people are brought to faith and grow in Christian character. As such, it is a necessary institution. It is necessary for the nurturing of disciples in a community devoted to the teachings of Christ and the development of a Christian way of life.<sup>4</sup>

2. *The Humanity of the Church.* Calvin, like Augustine before him, accepts a distinction between the visible and the invisible church. He notes that Scripture uses the word "church"

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. Neill & Ford Lewis Battles, vol. II (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.4.1, hereinafter, *Institutes*. All references to the *Institutes* will be to Book, Chapter and Section using Arabic numerals.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 15.

<sup>3</sup> See, Vanhoozer for an excellent description of the way in which Scripture and doctrine function to enable Christians to "perform" accurately the life of discipleship.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, "Epistle to the Romans" in Calvin's Commentaries. Vol. XIX. Tr. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 449.

in very different ways.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes it is used to refer to “the church triumphant,” the body of believers who have been received by God in heaven (4.1.7). On the other occasions, it is used to refer to the church universal, “the whole multitude of believers spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ” (4.1.7). At other times, it is used to refer to the local congregation, wherever “two or more are gathered” in the name of Christ (Matthew 18:20).

Calvin views the visible church as a human community, with all the defects that human beings bring into any organization.<sup>6</sup> It is full of imperfections because people are imperfect. Though the earthly church is imperfect because of human finitude, “we are commanded to revere and keep communion with [it], which is called a ‘church’ in respect to human beings” (4.1.7). The loyalty and honor we owe the church does not have to do with its perfection, but with its divine status as the community of believers. Through this imperfect community God has chosen to spread the Gospel. Although we speak of the church as containing all those who profess Christ, there are many in this group who are hypocritical, ambitious, greedy, envious, evil speakers and of an unclean life (4.1.7).

3. *The Locality of the Church.* For Calvin, the true church, bound together under the headship of Christ, centered in the apostolic faith, and bound together by love, is not to be found in a single institution or place, but is spread throughout the earth. Nevertheless, Calvin’s doctrine of the church recognizes that the local church, although spread all over the earth, is the primary locus of the Church of Jesus Christ, for it is this church that extends over the whole earth, even in “Africa, Egypt and all Asia,” where the Eastern Church, not the Roman Catholic, is dominant (4.2.2). Calvin observes that: “The church universal is a multitude gathered from all nations; it is divided and dispersed in separate places, but agrees on the one truth of divine doctrine, and is bound by the bond of the same religion. Under it are thus included individual churches, disposed in towns and villages according to human need, so that each rightly has the name and the authority of the church” (4.1.9).

As William Bouwsma puts it in his biography of the reformer, “For Calvin, although the church might in some abstract sense be a unity, a church remained for him, in spite of his experience with territorial Protestantism, always a specific community, local and personal.”<sup>7</sup> The implication of focusing attention on local churches as “divided and dispersed in separate places” and “disposed in towns and villages according to human need” is that the local congregation is the fundamental unit to be considered in formulating an ecclesiology.

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<sup>5</sup> The plurality of the ways in which Calvin uses the term, “church” is important. Calvin is aware of the plurality of meanings, and of the differences in the way “churches” are to be viewed depending on context. Some of his modern interpreters are not so careful, as will be seen as this series of articles unfolds.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth adopts a form of Calvin’s human view of the church. “As the work of the Holy Spirit the Christian community, the church is a work which takes place among men in the form of a human activity.” Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*. Vol. IV.1 Tr. G. W. Bromiley. Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1956: 650.

<sup>7</sup> William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 216. This emphasis on “locality” should not be read as indicating a Congregationalist bias on the part of Calvin. For Calvin, the “locality” of the church meant the city Geneva, which during Calvin’s time included several places of worship.

In Calvin's case, the fundamental unit was the church in Geneva. To some degree, one might call Calvin a "bottom up" ecclesialogist. His ecclesiology begins with the local congregation and from this perspective that he critiques other ecclesiastical bodies.

Calvin's local concept of the visible church is indicated in his description of the church in the earlier Genevan Confession, where he says: "While there is one only Church of Jesus Christ, we always acknowledge that necessity requires companies of the faithful to be distributed in different places. Of these assemblies each one is called Church."<sup>8</sup> The idea that the visible church involves "companies of the faithful" which are "distributed in different places" is an early indication of the essentially local nature of the church. The local congregation is "necessary" for the church to perform its function throughout the world.

This is a facet of Calvin's thought that is often lost sight of in modern denominational politics. The fundamental unit of any church polity is the local congregation.<sup>9</sup> Although in the Reformed tradition a connectional system is important and valuable, we ought not to lose sight of the fact that the basic unit of the church is the local congregation where people join together to hear the apostolic faith read and preached, to pray together, to celebrate communion as the body of Christ in that place; to share each other's lives, and to experience the love and power of the Community of the Spirit. It is in this sense that the church is indeed "irreducibly local". Unless the local body is healthy and vital, no other aspect of a denomination or grouping of congregations can be healthy.

This local-church aspect of Calvin's thought is extremely important as regards the renewal and reform of Reformed churches. Although larger church issues are important, the local congregation is at the center of any Reformed doctrine of the church. In the local congregation the Word is preached, sacraments administered, and discipline maintained. In the local congregation children are baptized, adults confess their faith, the doctrines of the faith is taught, morals are nourished, and worship is maintained. It is in the local congregation that life-changing relationships of love are experienced on a daily basis. Higher governing bodies derive their functions and legitimacy from the way in which they support and undergird the essentially domestic ministry of the church.

4. *The External Form of Relationality: Governance as Practical Adaptation and Conformity to Scripture.* Calvin did not think of a particular visible form of the church as sacred in the sense of its being necessary for salvation. He teaches that constitutions "are not to be considered necessary for salvation and thus bind consciences by scruples; nor are they to be associated with the worship of God and piety thus be lodged in them" (4.10.27). Calvin takes a practical view of church government. Church governance is needed in order that the discipline, honesty and peace of the church be maintained (4.10.1). Thus, church governance, like the visible church itself, is an accommodation to human sin and frailty.

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<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, "The Genevan Confession, Art. 18," *Tracts and Treatises* Vol. I J. K. S. Reid, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 31.

<sup>9</sup> The fact that the congregation is the fundamental unit of our polity should not blind us the fact that, just as atoms are made up of even smaller particles, so also are congregations made up of smaller units. Families, small groups, Bible studies, and other ministry groups are the building blocks of the local congregation. This "relational" view of the church is a facet of what could become a "post-modern" Reformed view of the church.

Within the broad parameters of Biblical norms, there can be various forms of ecclesiastical organization, constitution, and order.<sup>10</sup>

The Roman Church, according to Calvin, had degenerated from the purer order of the ancient church. Contrary to the ancient Biblical order, it substituted a hierarchical system centered on the papacy (4.6.1). For Calvin, this hierarchy was not founded upon the testimony of the Old and New Testaments (4.6.2-7). Thus, Calvin opposed hierarchies that absolutize themselves or depart from the teachings of Christ and the apostles in their doctrine or their organization. This would include Protestant, as well as Roman Catholic, hierarchies. The Reformation project, as envisioned by Calvin, was intended to reinstitute the proper form of the New Testament church, from which the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages had departed.

Calvin would not have thought of the modern, corporate denominational structure as sacred or to be maintained at any price. The legacy of Scottish Presbyterianism is the historic form of the church developed under the pressures of particular historical situations. Our current General Assembly, Synod, and Presbytery structures represent a polity developed in another era, and it ought to be celebrated, studied, and supported so long as those assemblies are faithful to our tradition.<sup>11</sup> Yet, these structures ought to be reformed where necessary for the faithful proclamation of the Word, given the needs of the day and time in which we minister.

Our current polity is profoundly affected by the modern corporate and bureaucratic forms of organization. Many writers note that this form of polity no longer resonates with people; nor is it well adapted to the realities of twenty-first century America. The decline of liberal mainline churches parallels the decline of modernism and the emergence of a postmodern, post-Christian age. Mainline denominations have been slow to apprehend the dramatic shifts in the culture in which they minister—a culture they helped to create and sustain and which they assumed would continue to be favorably structured for and receptive to their particular religious vision. As one retired professor observed, “We were slow to discern that the culture is not our friend”.<sup>12</sup> A return to a more pragmatic view of church organization and a willingness to change with the culture is an imperative in early twenty-first century America.

According to Calvin, there are three organizational elements that are essential for a properly organized Christian church:

a. *Headship of Christ.* The headship of Christ is the first and indispensable organizational requirement of a properly organized church body. A properly organized church is centered in Christ alone as its Head (4.6.8). Returning to Calvin’s notion of the church as the mother

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<sup>10</sup> See, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* Vol. IV.1: 652.

<sup>11</sup> In 1560 the first General Assembly of the Church of Scotland was held. It instituted a system of government that is remarkably similar to ours, with local congregations governed by elders and deacons. At the time, there were probably about a dozen Presbyterian ministers in Scotland. Six elders and thirty-six ruling elders attended. See, Walter L. Lingle and John W. Kuykendall, *Presbyterians: Their History and Beliefs*. Rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 40.

<sup>12</sup> Personal conversation with C. Ellis Nelson.

of faith, without the headship of Christ, the familial ground which is central to the notion of the church as a family is missing. Without Christ as the head of the church, there is not a family, but a collection of persons who will constantly divide into factions and quarrel. True to the Christological foundation of all of Calvin's thought, the church is founded not on bishops, or on the person Peter, nor on any other external foundation, but on Christ and Christ alone (4.6.6).<sup>13</sup>

b. *Sound Doctrine.* For Calvin, purity of doctrine is an essential element of a properly functioning church. Because of his emphasis on doctrine as the "glue" that holds the church together, Calvin would consider the modern tendency to think of church unity as flowing from polity and not from agreed doctrine as misguided. The church must find its unity in Christ and in properly conceived thinking about God as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. There is no other source of unity.

c. *Biblical Model.* Calvin was not tied to any one external form as absolutely required for proper organization. He was aware that, from time to time and from place to place in the history of the church, the external form of the church had changed. Despite this diversity of external form, the indispensable requirement of any human constitution of the church was that it be "founded upon God's authority" and "drawn from Scripture" (4.10.30). So, if the first requirement of a proper external form is the lordship of Christ, the second requirement is conformity to the teachings of Scripture.

4. *Structure Adapted to Circumstances.* Within the broad parameters set by Scripture, a church is free to organize in a variety of ways. Thus, Calvin felt no need for bishops in Geneva, although he recognized that the office was of great antiquity and possessed Biblical warrant. The actual constitutional organization of the church is, for Calvin, a practical accommodation to the circumstances of the day, not as Rome would have it, a matter of eternal decree. The only burden Calvin would place upon the church is that its reformation be in accordance with the Word of God in faithfulness to Christ as its head.

This pragmatism which characterized Calvin's view of church order left him free to view various kinds of order as proper. While certain features are necessary, such as the headship of Christ and conformity with Scripture, within the wide boundaries of Scripture, governance of the church is to be accommodated to the needs of the time. Thus, in his view, churches are eternally bound by the testimonies of God as to matters of faith. As to organization, there is freedom to accommodate organization to the needs of the times, "for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age" (4.10.30).

In preaching the gospel from age to age, new practices may have to be adopted and old practices abandoned (4. 10.30). In this regard, Calvin says:

[T]he Lord has in his sacred oracles faithfully embraced and clearly expressed both the whole sum of his righteousness and all aspects of the worship of his majesty, and whatever is necessary for salvation; therefore, in these the master alone is to be heard. But, because he did not will in outward discipline and

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<sup>13</sup> "The community is the earthly historical form of Jesus Christ himself. ... He is the head of this body, the community. And it is the Body which has its head in him." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*. Vol. IV.1: 661.

ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended on the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages), here we must take refuge in those general rules which he has given, that whatever the necessity of the church will require for order and decorum should be tested against these (4.10.30).

This passage illustrates the radically pragmatic character of Calvin's approach to church organization. The Scriptural and doctrinal basis of the church is grounded in the history of Israel and the apostolic testimony of the New Testament. But the external form of the church is not fixed. It will depend on the needs of the times.

In accommodating to the needs of the times, it is important that the specific organization of the church conform to Scripture, and that due respect be given to the orders of the church as they have existed in the past. "For, even though the bishops of those times promulgated many canons, by which they seemed to express more than was expressed in Scripture, they still conformed their establishment with such care to the unique pattern of God's Word that you may readily see that it had almost nothing in this respect alien to God's Word" (4.4.1). Within the scope of a consciously Biblically founded format, the church is free to innovate as to specific matters of organization.

The kind of innovation that is called for in every age is the adaptation of the historic Biblical ecclesiology of the church to new cultural realities. For Reformed Christians, this does not mean the abandonment of our historic reliance on the office of elder, nor does it mean eliminating entirely our relational/connectional system. It means adapting the nature of our polity to the cultural realities in which the church ministers.

## PART 2: IDENTITY AND THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH

The "humanity" of the church discussed above implies its fallibility and reformability. The visible church is not beyond criticism for its failures or reform of its forms. The visible church can be structured and restructured to accommodate the needs of the day. In this context, I want to explore the continuing validity of Calvin's "marks" as conceptual tools which are available to guide the evaluation and reformation of the visible church. In the *Institutes*, Calvin distinguished between "true churches," those which are rightly ordered, and "false churches," which are not. As standards to guide human judgment in distinguishing the two, Calvin discerns certain "marks of the church," or qualities that characterize a true church of Christ. Citing Ephesians 2:20, he says: "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists" (4.1.9). Thus, Calvin discerns two marks of the church: The Word of God purely preached; b. The Sacraments administered according to Christ's institution.

The often-identified "third mark" is discipline rightly administered. Calvin does not, in his *Institutes*, specifically identify discipline as a mark, but it plays an important role in his

theology.<sup>14</sup> Because the true church has its marks, congregations can be tested concerning their existence. The marks distinguish between “true” and “false” churches. So, “every congregation that claims the name ‘church’ must be tested by this standard as by a touchstone” (4.1.11). Those in which the marks are found should be honored as true churches. Those in which the marks are not to be found are to be avoided (4.1.11).

The idea that churches are to be evaluated concerning their fidelity to a proper understanding of Word and Sacrament distinguishes Calvin’s ecclesiology from that of the Roman Church. For Calvin, the church is not beyond criticism, reform, or even separation. The impact of Calvin’s willingness to critique and evaluate the church is to “desacrilize” the church as an institution.<sup>15</sup> The visible church can be judged against the testimony of Scripture, critiqued, and reformed, or even radically changed.

1. *Preaching of the Word: Doctrine and Unity.* For Calvin, it is fundamental that a church is a body that “agrees on the one truth of divine doctrine, and is bound by the bond of the same religion” (4.1.9). The true church is bound together by sound doctrine and brotherly love (4.2.5). Brotherly love, however, depends upon the existence of the first element—sound doctrine:

But it must be noted that this conjunction of love so depends upon unity of faith that it ought to be its beginning, end, and, in fine, its sole rule. Let us therefore remember that whenever church unity is commended to us, this is required: that while our minds agree in Christ, our wills should also be joined with mutual benevolence in Christ (4.2.5).

The love that binds the church together is a kind of “truth/love” that combines a right apostolic understanding and right personal relationships built upon the foundation of right understanding. There can be no “right relationship” apart from “right understanding”. Thus, apart from the Word of God, there is no church, just a faction of persons (4.2.5).

According to Calvin, doctrine is so essential that, apart from it “Christianity cannot stand” (4.2.2). An inevitable result of any lack of doctrinal agreement is, for Calvin, the dissolution of the church. This aspect of Calvin’s thought is jarring in an age committed to theological pluralism. Yet, Calvin’s observation may explain the factionalism that disturbs mainline denominations: without a doctrinal center, factions are inevitable and unity of spirit and love are impossible. Different theologies result in fundamentally different concepts of God, Christ, the Spirit, salvation, worship, morals, and church organization. The result must be division and dissension. A significant degree of theological agreement on sound doctrinal

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<sup>14</sup> The principle of theological discipline is fundamental to Calvin’s ecclesiology. Geddes MacGregor, *Corpus Christi: The Nature of the Church According to the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 62. In his Reply to Sadolet, Calvin states, “There are three things on which the safety of the Church is founded and supported; doctrine, discipline and sacraments; and to these a fourth is added: ceremonies by which to exercise the people in offices of piety.” See, “Reply to Sadolet” in *Tracts and Treatises* Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 232.

<sup>15</sup> Barth agrees with the desacrilizing of the visible church, noting that “no concrete form of the Christian community can in itself and such be the object of faith.” *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Vol. IV.1: 658.

principles is central to maintaining a fellowship of Christians. A church without sound doctrine simply dissolves from the inside out.

Consistent with the importance of the pure preaching of the Word, the church has two primary doctrinal responsibilities: to set out the doctrines of the faith and to accurately teach them (4.8.1). The dignity of the church and its leadership is wholly dependent upon maintaining the ministry of the Word entrusted to the apostles and their successors (4.8.2). When pastors faithfully proclaim what the Scriptures teach, they follow in the footsteps of the prophets and the apostles (4.8.3-4). Thus, servants of God should teach nothing that they have not learned from Christ, though they are free to adjust their teaching to the “diversity of the times” (4.8.5).

This freedom to adapt preaching and teaching to the needs of the times does not, however, extend to “innovation”. Teachers should teach nothing that is not included in the sacred writings nor depart from sound doctrine (4.8.6). Thus, Calvin writes:

Let this be a firm principle: no other word is to be held as the Word of God, and given place as such in the church, than what is contained in the Law and the Prophets, then in the writing of the Apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and standard of his Word (4.8.8).

The pastoral role is that of expounding the Scriptures and teaching doctrine in accordance with the revelation of the word in the Old and New Testaments, subject to the controlling revelation of Christ (4.8.7). “Faithful ministers are now not permitted to coin any new doctrine, but they are simply to cleave to that doctrine to which God has subjected all men without exception” (4.8.9; see also, 4. 8. 1 5). In expounding the pure Word of God, pastors are not to twist Scripture nor are private inspirations of the Spirit to be taught (4.8. 10). The unity of Word and Spirit is such that they can never contradict one another or be separated (4.8. 13).

The decay of doctrine and of the teaching office of the church is one of the clearest indicators that some kind of confessional and structural distance may be appropriate. Speaking of the Roman Church, Calvin criticizes the formulation of new doctrines and the evil of turning people away from the pure Word of God:

Indeed under the term “spiritual power” I include boldness in formulating new doctrines by which they have turned people away from the original purity of God’s Word, the wicked traditions with which they have ensnared them, and the pretended ecclesiastical jurisdiction which they exercise. .(4.11.8).

Decay in the teaching office of the church, characterized by “new doctrines” and turning away from pure doctrine, is characteristic of a false church. Such a church, administered by a corrupt bureaucracy, must fall whenever the kingdom of Christ comes among the people (4.11.1.8). Thus, the central pastoral task is the maintenance of sound doctrine.

For Calvin, it is not enough that there be doctrinal agreement. There must be agreement on *right and true* doctrine. The task of the church in developing doctrinal standards is, therefore, not to seek mere agreement. It is to seek doctrinal agreement in such a way that the scriptural witness to Christ is faithfully rendered in the language of the times. “Innovation,” where it involves importing alien elements into the church, is a vice to be

avoided. The concept is that the apostolic faith of the early church, which Calvin and the other reformers thought they were recapturing must be adapted to a new time, not changed to accommodate the spirit of an age.

A primary function of doctrine is to set boundaries for discourse and for teaching such that a way of life and thought are shaped by its contours.<sup>16</sup> The Church is a people organized around a common set of beliefs who interpret reality on the basis of a similar set of ideas. To some degree, the interminable debates in mainline churches over doctrine and morals are a consequence of the erosion of a common doctrinal center that permits debate to reach a reasonable conclusion within the framework of a common doctrinal consensus. It is difficult for agreement to be reached among persons who disagree on such fundamental aspects of Christian faith as whether God is a transcendent being or a concept describing human capacity for self transcendence; whether Christ was the Son of God or a human in whom God was uniquely present; whether the Cross is central to salvation; whether the resurrection is historical or symbolic; whether the Old and the New Testaments are divinely inspired documents or records of human contact with the divine and the like. For Calvin, a lack of doctrinal unity of this magnitude is bound to result in endless debate, fractious quarrels, and lack of unity—exactly what mainline churches have experienced.

Seeking, let alone enforcing, some degree of doctrinal unity is extremely difficult in an age and denomination committed to pluralism and theological inclusivism. Yet, because of the central role of confessions and doctrine in the Reformed tradition, it is difficult to see how unity and peace can be preserved without some kind of doctrinal center. To say that there needs to be a doctrinal center and confessional unity is to imply that some ideas and theological positions are to be excluded—exactly the thing that pluralism and inclusivism want to avoid.

3. *Performance of Sacraments: Practices of the Word.* Calvin defined a sacrament as “an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and that we in turn attest our piety toward him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men” (4.14.1). The first two marks (the Word purely preached and the Sacraments properly administered) are not of equal importance for Calvin. For Calvin, the true church is primarily marked by the pure ministry of the Word. The sacraments play a central, but subordinate role.<sup>17</sup> Sacraments are an “aid to our faith related to the preaching of the Gospel” (4.14.1).

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<sup>16</sup> I am indebted to George A. Lindbeck and to his “cultural-linguistic” analysis of the function of doctrine for a portion of my analysis. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 33-34. More recently, Kevin Vanhooser has explored the importance of doctrine insofar as it permits a true performance of Christian faith and warns against false performances that do not lead to wise living. See, Kevin Vanhooser, *The Drama of Doctrine* previously cited. Vanhooser calls his adaptation of Linbeck, “canonical linguistic,” which emphasizes the role of the canon is providing a basic norm for faith and practice. I am personally inclined towards a “canonical existential” approach which emphasizes the role of doctrine in creating and sustaining authentic Christian faith and practice – a way of life in which our being is transformed.

<sup>17</sup> Rev. Dr. Iain R. Torrance, “Mysterium Christi and Mystenum Ecclesiae: The Christological Ecclesiology of John Calvin,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* Vol. 43/No. 1-4 (1998): 465.

The sacraments are an outward sign whose function is the sustaining and sealing of our faith, confirming God's Word (4.14.1, 3). The mark which consists in the sacraments' being rightly administered is their dependence upon the Word's being preached in such a way that the sign is made intelligible (4.14.4). Thus, "the right administering of the sacrament cannot stand apart from the Word" (4.17.39). Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the only sacraments—one, an entry initiation into the faith, and the other a continual food for believers (4.18.19). To these sacraments instituted by Christ the church may not add others (4.18.20).

In order for the sacraments to function properly in the church, they must not be viewed as magical or interpreted in such a way as to lead to superstition (4.17.36, 39). This being the case, the sacraments must be understood and administered in accordance with sound doctrine. Thus, Calvin teaches:

Therefore, those who have devised the adoration of the Sacraments have not only dreamed it by themselves apart from Scripture, where no mention of it can be shown—something that they would not have overlooked if it had been acceptable to God but also with Scripture crying out against it, they have forsaken the living God and fashioned a God after their own desire (4.17.36).

This passage warns that sacraments are not rightly administered when they are developed apart from, or without reference to, Scripture, but imported from human reason. It is worse where sacramental acts are developed with "Scripture crying out against it" (4.17.36). This could apply, for example, to the kind of ceremonies that characterized the so called "Reimaging Conference" or "smudgings" (American Indian ceremonies) at a recent General Assembly. Though not billed as "sacraments," they are apt to confuse and obscure the importance of the sacraments. This kind of innovation could easily be brought within the category of superstitious rites "utterly alien to the institution of the Supper, with the intent of paying divine homage to the sign" (4.17.37).

Calvin's sacramental theology is an example of his concern for the relationship between sound doctrine and worship. Calvin's theological concern is to simplify, to faithfully follow Scripture, and to avoid obscurity, superstition, and meaningless repetition. (See, 4.17-18). A faithfully constructed doctrine of the church must provide a way of discerning what liturgical innovations stand outside of reasonable doctrinal boundaries. For Calvin, God desires to be worshiped "in spirit and in truth," not according to the "frivolities of man's devising."<sup>18</sup>

A proper enactment of the Christian faith requires above all things a proper sacramental reenactment of the passion of Christ as part of the Lord's Supper – one that reinforces a

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<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, "On the Necessity of Reforming the Church," *Tracts and Treatises*, Vol. I J. K. S. Reid, vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 152. This aspect of Calvin's thought has important ramifications for contemporary churches. The lack of doctrinal agreement has practical liturgical consequences and results in substantial conflict. For example, it is impossible to achieve agreement on whether "milk and honey" and other neo-pagan rituals are within the boundaries of accepted practice. This being the case, disagreements over worship and sacramental practice will and must occur. It is not, therefore, surprising that, for example, the PC(USA) in which I am a pastor has experienced just this sort of conflict on a recurring basis.

Trinitarian understanding that “God was reconciling the world in Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:19). When “smudgings,” “milk and honey” rituals and other suspect rituals occur, they tend to obscure rather than confirm proper doctrine and practice. If becoming religious in a particular way involves gaining skill in a particular set of practices that constitute worship, in the case of Christians the worship of the Triune God as revealed in Jesus Christ, then the liturgical practice of the church has to effect a internalization of reasonable doctrine formed around the life, death and resurrection of Christ in the life of the individual.<sup>19</sup> Other rituals, however emotionally inspiring, have a tendency to be misleading. The absence of a coherent doctrinal center has, as one of its important consequences, an increasing lack of boundaries regarding what does and does not constitute appropriate worship. Thus, we find warring factions in the church not only on issues involving doctrine, but also on issues involving worship and the sacraments.<sup>20</sup>

4. *Protective Boundary Maintenance: Appropriate Discipline.* Calvin is a realist concerning human nature and the need for discipline. No church can exist without discipline, for “[if] no society, indeed, no house which has even a small family, can be kept in proper condition without discipline, it is so much more necessary in the church, whose condition should be as ordered as possible” (4.12.1). Discipline is “like a bridle to restrain and tame those who rage against the doctrine of Christ; or like a spur to arouse those of little inclination; and also sometimes like a father’s rod to chastise mildly and with the gentleness of Christ’s spirit those who have more seriously lapsed” (4.12.1).

All human organizations need a visible structure so that the church can function in an orderly manner and morals can be maintained. Without constitutions and discipline, churches are deprived of the “sinews” that hold together a body of believers and disintegrate (4. 10.27). The body needs a method of discipline, so that the morals of the church and its doctrine do not disintegrate. “For as no city or township can function without a magistrate and polity, so the church of God ... needs a spiritual polity” (4.11.1).

Appropriate church discipline has a positive and a negative aspect: there is a need to both restrain and encourage depending on the circumstances. The duty of the church is to administer it responsibly and faithfully. Pastors and elders are to be faithful in the duty of admonition (4.12.2). There are to be stages of church discipline: Discipline should move from private admonition to public exposure (4.12.3) and from mild to extreme forms of punishment (4. 12.4). The movement is always to be from mild to more severe forms of discipline (4.12.8). In extreme cases of sin, exclusion from the body may be warranted (4.12.4). Yet, the purpose of church discipline is always to be kept in mind: it is intended to set boundaries for the fellowship so that Christ is not dishonored, to see that the body is not

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<sup>19</sup> See, Lindbeck, *op. cit.*, p. 19 and his notion of “symbolizing activities”.

<sup>20</sup> I would go beyond Calvin and insist that his mark, “the sacraments rightly administered,” needs to be supplemented by a recognition that under the conditions of “post-Christendom” a rightly organized church will be marked by a variety of practices performed in a manner that glorifies the Triune God consistent with the apostolic witness to Christ in the church. A church where prayer, Bible study or service to the poor, for example, is ignored is just as deficient as a church in which the sacraments are not properly administered. The focus of a post-modern church will be on in which there is a “lived performance” of Christian faith. “To exercise good Christian judgment is not only to proclaim but to *practice* the righteousness of God.” Vanhoozer, 354.

corrupted, and to secure repentance of the sinner (4.12.5). In all cases, discipline is to be gently and mildly administered (4. 12.9, 13).

In regard to discipline, churches must be concerned both with dealing with sin in a wholesome way and with maintaining unity in the bond of peace (4.1.16). “Holy Scripture bids us correct our brother’s vices with more moderate care, while preserving sincerity of love and unity of peace” (4.1.16). The need to maintain unity and peace cannot however preempt the necessity of discipline, without which the church is sure to experience corruption and disunity.

One of the most difficult areas for the modern church to discuss is the entire subject of discipline. For some, it conjures up visions of an inquisition. Few Presbyterian congregations would think of administering the kind of discipline that Calvin instituted in sixteenth century Geneva. Yet, it is difficult to see how unity can be maintained without some kind of church discipline. While contemporary culture is hostile to communal norms, they are necessary to form and maintain any community, and any community in which they are neglected must weaken.

It is important to emphasize that Calvin sees polity as a spiritual matter, not as a governmental matter. A spiritual polity is a polity that is conducive to the maintenance of apostolic doctrine and sound morals. It sets boundaries on human behavior so that Christians can attain authentic discipleship. Although there are many ways to tell the Christian story, and Reformed Christians may not possess all the truth, if they are to maintain their distinctive way of telling and embodying the gospel, Reformed Christians must have doctrinal and behavioral norms. There are many valid ways to worship the triune God, but without doctrinal boundaries it is impossible to maintain Reformed distinctives compared to other Christian groups, and increasingly, against neo-pagan New Age groups and other secular forces.

One difficult aspect of the current controversies in the mainline churches is the common feeling that the innovations of discipline of the national churches are “conceived apart from the Word”. For example, assuming that Scripture condemns homosexual practice, permitting homosexual marriage or ordination of self-affirmed, non-repentant, practicing homosexual persons would constitute a serious breach of discipline. Making ordination a matter of local option cannot obscure the problematic character of one part of a governing body approving what others, and Scripture, prohibit. The current denominational structures

cannot be peacefully sustained without a common doctrinal, liturgical and disciplinary center.<sup>21</sup>

### PART 3: CALVIN, REORGANIZATION, REFORMATION AND SEPARATION

A Reformed doctrine of the church flows from the way in which Calvin and the reformers subjected the structures and doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church to a searching reexamination in the light of the Biblical witness to Christ and the church. For the reformers, the visible structures of the church were not above being reformed in light of Holy Scripture. They were, in fact, subject to searching examination to be certain that they conformed to the Word of God. If they did not, they were to be reformed in accordance with the Word, and if that was not possible, separation was called for.

Much talk about separation among Reformed Christians is designed to bring an end to discussion of alternatives by prejudging proposals as amounting to "schism." We should be careful about using Calvin's words concerning schism in an unreflective way to end discussion of various organizational and reorganizational options. Calvin's admonitions against schism are largely drawn from examples of local congregations and contain language indicating that he has in mind primarily the danger of separation from local congregations. In this section I will discuss the nature of schism and separation in Calvin's thought in order to clarify this thinking regarding the way in which Christians ought to relate to ecclesiastical structures that are defective.

1. *Schism as Separation from a True Church.* Calvin's "marks" provide a means for making judgments concerning the spiritual health of a church body and for determining whether renewal or separation from a church is warranted. For Calvin, separation from a true church, even if that church is defective in small ways, is "schism" and is to be avoided. Yet, Calvin's Genevan church was in fact separated from the Roman Church, and Calvin did not think of his situation as involving schism. Why was this so?

a. *Doctrine and Schism.* Calvin's attack on the Roman Church largely involves his contention that the ministry of the Word and Sacrament was corrupted by doctrinal innovation to such a degree that the Roman Church was unrecognizable as a "church" in the Biblical sense of the term (4.2.2). In Calvin's mind, the Roman Church had exalted itself as an organization while at the same time ignoring sound doctrine (4.2.2). It had become idolatrous toward its institutional form, while ignoring the need for fidelity to the Word. "So, in place of the church the Romanists display certain outward appearances which are often

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<sup>21</sup> Attempts by those who favor homosexual ordination to seek approval of the practice is an example of the way in which discipline is difficult in the modern world and the practical and moral consequences of a lack of doctrinal agreement. Discipline is impossible without agreement on what types of behavior justifies it. Thus, lack of doctrinal agreement affects the ability of the church to administer corrective discipline. Those who believe that the ordination of self-affirmed, non-repentant homosexuals would be a major departure from Biblical faith and a central doctrinal and moral lapse are unlikely to view this kind of departure from traditional morals and doctrine as incidental to Christian faith and practice. Similarly, if the PC(USA) were to approve the blessing of so called "gay unions," it is difficult to see how many Presbyterians could square such approval with long-held views of the sacredness of marriage and the family.

far removed from the church and without which the church can very well stand” (4.2.2). The Roman Church has committed the same error as the ancient Jews: they have mistaken the outward show of religion for true faith (4.2.4).

Calvin’s primary critique of the Roman Church, and its failure as a “true Church,” centers on its doctrinal failures. In a moment of hyperbole, Calvin writes: “For of the secret theology which prevails among them, the first article is, that there is no God; the second: everything written and taught about Christ is falsehood and deceit. The third: the doctrines of a life to come and of a final resurrection are mere fables” (4.7.27). Not all of the Roman hierarchy thought so and few who did would clearly speak what they believed, but the institutional church seemingly was still governed by this theology (4.7.27). Under such circumstances, it was no longer a true church and those who wished to separate themselves were free to do so – as the church in Geneva did. Of course, not every instance involving the absence of appropriate discipline justifies separation. So Calvin says, “But, even if the church be slack in its duty, still each and every individual has not the right at once to take upon himself the decision to separate” (4.1.15). Thus, there may be a certain slackness in discipline that does not erase the mark of the church that consists in “discipline being rightly administered”<sup>22</sup>

The power of the church to administer discipline does not permit it to enact laws that prescribe a rule of life or establish any obligation “conceived apart from God’s Word” (4.10.6). All that is needed for the perfect rule of life is contained in the laws of God (4.10.7). Church discipline is not permitted to nullify a command of God (4.10.10). An organization which “passes the bounds of God’s word” is not a church (4.10.17). Thus, the power of churches to order themselves is not the power to innovate theologically, morally, or organizationally, apart from Scripture.

For Calvin, judgment must be made under the guidance of Scripture concerning the presence or absence of the marks of the church. Fundamental to his view of schism was his belief that, where the marks of the church are present, a true church exists and “no one is permitted to spurn its authority, flout its warnings, resist its counsels, or make light of its chastisements, much less to desert it and break unity” (4.1.10). For Calvin, any person who leaves “any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of the Word and

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<sup>22</sup> It may be that it is precisely this aspect of discipline that explains Calvin’s ambivalence about the precise role that discipline plays as a mark and the appropriateness of separation from a church that lacks proper discipline. Although Calvin would not have thought of the need of discipline to be subjective, the response of the governing body to a lack of proper doctrine, sacramental practice or moral character is by its very nature subjective and situational. This does not necessarily give comfort to groups like those who would ordain “self affirmed, practicing and non-repentant homosexuals,” since Calvin would clearly have viewed a body which allowed such practices as lacking both sound doctrine and discipline.

Sacraments, is guilty of schism" (4.1.10). Thus, "schism" takes place whenever a person or persons breaks fellowship where the marks of a true church are present.<sup>23</sup>

The question that immediately springs to mind is, "What is the church that Calvin had in mind?" Both the location of this admonition, just after his discussion of the local church "dispersed over the earth," and his use of the term "any Christian society" (4.1.10) indicate that he had in mind the geographically dispersed, individual churches which together form the universal church (see, 4.1.8). It is unlikely that he had in mind the Roman Catholic Church, from which the church at Geneva had already distanced itself. Nor is it likely that he had in mind the Protestant churches of Europe. Of course, nothing remotely like modern denominations was in his mind. The only answer that makes sense is to view Calvin's admonition against to include separation from a local body of believers in which there is an orthodox ministry of the Word and Sacrament.

Calvin's reluctance to countenance separation does have its limits. Although "some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments" without warranting a schism (4.1.12), where there are serious doctrinal errors, the existence of the true church may be denied. In a very important passage, Calvin states:

For not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God in one; Christ alone is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests on Christ's mercy; and the like. Among churches, there are other articles of doctrine that are disputed which still do not break the unity of faith (4.1.12).

There are several aspects of this passage that are important for an understanding of Calvin's doctrine of the church. First, Calvin believed there are doctrines so central that their denial would amount to a denial of the essential elements of Christian faith and practice. He did not give a complete outline of these doctrines, but centered his analysis on those which deal with Christ and with the nature of salvation. Second, Calvin believed that there were other doctrines which involve "nonessential matters" which ought not to cause schism. The precise details of the future life are an example of a doctrine which involves nonessential matters (4.1.12).

One of the most serious difficulties of the mainline churches has been to define what might constitute essential elements of Christian faith. Presbyterians have been most seriously affected because it was among Presbyterians that the so-called Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy was most seriously waged. Aversion to the so-called "Six Fundamentals" has made it extremely difficult for Presbyterians to either define or enforce a theological center for mainline bodies. Nevertheless, there must be some boundaries to any organization by which it defines its essential beliefs. The current controversies in the mainline churches are

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<sup>23</sup> For Calvin, "schism" involves separation for personal and private reasons, such as a grudge against a pastor or a willful refusal to abide by sound doctrine and practice. Separation where there is significant doctrinal disorder is not "schism." See, John Calvin "Commentary on The First Epistle to the Corinthians" in *Calvin's Commentaries*. Vol. XX.I Tr. John Pringle. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 366.

the bitter fruit of pluralism without a common language for defining the ways in which the Christian story can be told and the related boundaries of faith and practice for the community can be established.<sup>24</sup>

In the absence of a core set of doctrinal boundaries, it is impossible to maintain a cohesive ministry. For example, most conservative Presbyterians believe in some form of the doctrine of the atonement, which is embodied in the church's Confessions. When speakers at denominational functions deny the cross, implying that it is not needed or "no big deal," without being disciplined, it seems as if the church has no theological boundaries for its pastors and theological leaders. Others feel that the secular notion of "freedom of expression" ought to permit such denials. In the absence of theological boundaries, denominations are doomed to endless disagreements.<sup>25</sup>

Although our culture is hostile to the creation and maintenance of doctrinal norms and boundaries, studies show that churches and denominations which have strict standards for faith and practice do in fact prosper.<sup>26</sup> Sound doctrine and moral teaching meet a deeply felt need of many post-modern people to find standards of faith and behavior in a society without socially enforced behavior standards. Beyond this observation is the simple fact that without standards and boundaries no "form of life," not even a Christian form of life can be maintained.

b. *Sin and Separation.* The issue of sin in the church, and its relationship to schism, is important for an understanding of Calvin's thought. Calvin was very concerned about the activities of the Anabaptists, whom he analogized to the Donatists which Augustine earlier confronted (4. 1.13). For Calvin, though the existence of sin in the church is an occasion for grief, sin does not of its own result in the absence of the true church. Those who break fellowship with a true church because of imperfections are vainly seeking a "a church besmirched with no blemish" (4.1.13). Against ecclesiastical perfectionism, Calvin cites the example of Corinth. The church of Corinth was, for Calvin, paradigmatic for the church at all times in history. Immorality and doctrinal error were present in the church, and vile corruption was evident among its members. "Yet the church abides among them because the ministry of the Word and Sacraments remain unrepudiated there" (4.1.14). It is interesting

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<sup>24</sup> See, Lindbeck, *op. cit.*, 80-84.

<sup>25</sup> Defining central Christian theological affirmations is a daunting task in any period. It is made more difficult in mainline denominations due to a number of factors. First, some, like the PC(USA), have opted for a Book of Confessions containing multiple documents. This permits a fuller understanding of the Reformed tradition than any single confession allows. Still, there is no single expression of Reformed faith to which pastors and other leaders agree to be led. Second, outside of the confessions themselves, there is no longer agreement upon the meaning of the central affirmations of Scripture upon which those affirmations are based. For example, those who see the resurrection as an event in history and those who see the resurrection as an experience of the apostles, are making very different affirmations when they affirm that "on the third day, he rose from the dead." Finally, there are those committed to theological pluralism who deny that defining a doctrinal center is a good or desirable thing.

<sup>26</sup> See, Dean R. Hoge & David A. Roozen, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline (1950-1978)*. (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979).

that Calvin uses the example of a local congregation (4.1.14). Although there was corruption present in the Corinthian fellowship, the local Corinthian fellowship was still a true church of Christ, and, on Calvin's analysis, it constituted schism to leave it.

Calvin's tolerance of sin in the church might seem to imply that moral issues should not become a foundation of confessional and governmental distance from a body. This, however, is a misreading of Calvin. One of his most penetrating indictments of the Roman Church has to do with the corruption of the clergy. In speaking of the Roman clergy Calvin notes:

Today, there is no order of men more notorious in excess, effeminacy, voluptuousness, in short in all sorts of lusts; in no order are their masters more adept or skillful in every deceit, fraud, treason, and treachery; nowhere is there as great cunning or boldness to do harm. I say nothing of their arrogance, pride, greed and cruelty. I say nothing about the dissolute license of their entire life (4.5.14).

So far as Calvin was concerned, the corruption of the clergy had reached the point that the order of the Roman Church could no longer be defended (4.5.14). The Roman Church had become so corrupt that "fornication, wantonness, drunkenness and misdeeds of this sort, they not only tolerate but, so to speak, foster and confirm those evils with tacit approval not only among the people but also among the clergy themselves" (4.11.7). Such a situation was not to be tolerated.

So, on Calvin's analysis, the Roman Church had not only been corrupted as to doctrine, but the clergy also had been corrupted. Speaking of the clergy of his day, Calvin says: "If their morals are appraised, we shall find few or almost none whom the ancient canons would not have judged unworthy" (4.5.1). For Calvin, a church that has ceased upholding discipline is certain to disgrace its Head, Christ, to be troubled by the corruption of good people, and to be without the benefits that repentance brings to the congregation.<sup>27</sup>

For Calvin, the holiness of the church is a work of the Spirit as "the Lord is daily at work in it, smoothing its wrinkles and cleansing its spots" (4.1.17). In justifying his conclusion, he pointed out the example of the prophets of ancient Israel (4.1.18) and Christ and his disciples (4.1.19). So long as the Word of God is preached and the sacraments properly administered, schism in a local church in the vain search for absolute holiness is unwarranted. This is true whether the vices are great or small, whether involving clergy or laity (4.1.19). Finally, in dealing with sin in the visible church, Calvin would have us remember the importance of forgiveness in the Christian life (4.1.20). Churches, as well as individual believers, receive the benefits of Christ and are in constant need of the forgiveness of God (4.1.22). God's treatment of his people in the Old Testament eloquently testifies to the importance of forgiveness in the history of God's people and its continuing importance to his New Testament church (4.1.24-27).

Calvin's teachings concerning schism are important for local churches confronting divisive issues, for renewal organizations and for others trying to define how local congregations ought to respond to positions taken by higher church bodies. Calvin's teaching

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen M. Johnson, "The Sinews of the Body of Christ: Calvin's Doctrine of Church Discipline," *Westminster Theological Journal* Vol. 59 No. 1 (Spring 1997): 87-100.

on schism ought to cause individual church members to be reluctant to leave individual churches because of imperfections in the national polity of their denomination. So long as the Word is purely preached, the sacraments properly administered, and discipline rightly enforced in a local congregation, a true church exists. This being the case, even minor imperfections and failures of discipline in the local church, or larger problems with the denomination, do not warrant schism.<sup>28</sup>

2. *Confessional and Governmental Distance as a Response to a the Existence Defective Body.* From the foregoing, it might seem that distancing a local congregation from an existing ecclesiastical body is almost unthinkable. While it is true that, for Calvin, peripheral failures of doctrine and discipline does not justify division. "... as soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, surely the death of the church follows just as a man's life is ended when this throat is pierced or his heart mortally wounded" (4.2. 1). Because the foundation of the church is the teaching of the apostles and prophets, where that foundation is destroyed, the church crumbles and falls (4.2.1). When this occurs, separation in the form of distancing the local community from a defective body does not involve schism, for no true church is involved. This is an important distinction. For Calvin, "schism" and "distancing a true church from a defective church" are two entirely different matters. Where the marks of the church have been overturned, there is no church and one who seeks to restore and renew the church by separation is not being schismatic.

Though Calvin denied that the Roman Church was in a recognizable form a "true church" (4.2. 10), "vestiges" of a true church remained (4.2.11). Though the extent of defects rendered the Roman Church in no sense "the church," Calvin concludes "we do not for this reason impugn the existence of churches among them" (4.2. 12).<sup>29</sup> Although the Roman Church was defective, "true churches" in which the marks of the church remained, existed among its local congregations. Thus, Calvin concludes:

To sum up, I call them churches to the extent that the Lord wonderfully preserves in them a remnant of lock Qhis people, however woefully dispersed and scattered, and to the extent that some marks of the church remain especially those marks whose effectiveness neither the devil's wiles nor human depravity can destroy. But, on the other hand, because in them those marks have been erased to which we should pay particular regard in this discourse, I say that every one of their congregations and their whole body lack the lawful form of the church (4.2.12).

Separation under these circumstances was not schism, since the larger body lacked the essential characteristics of a true church.

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<sup>28</sup> Bluntly put, for Calvin the Genevan church was a true and rightly ordered church. Therefore, though the Genevan church might have distanced itself from Rome, individual members were not entitled to distance themselves from the local church in Geneva.

<sup>29</sup> Notice the subtle ways in which Calvin uses the term "church". For him, the Roman church was not a church, but there are true churches within the body of the Roman Church. Whether Calvin was aware of the subtleties involved is unclear. What is clear is that he does not think that separation from the Roman church is "schism" and the only kind of "schism" he seems to prohibit involves local congregations.

Though the Roman Church did not possess the marks of a true Church, still, there were local congregations in which true doctrine and practice were found. Implicit in the concept of "vestigial churches" is the idea that even vestigial churches do not totally escape the consequences of the lack of proper doctrine and practice. They still participate in a defective body and must be affected by the defects of the whole.

Calvin's attitude toward seeking governmental distance from a defective higher body is more difficult to interpret than is ordinarily noticed. First, Calvin had no conception of anything remotely resembling a modern denomination. Second, it is difficult to reason from the passages involving local first century churches, such as at Corinth, both because they did not conceive of modern denominationalism and because they are closely analogous to modern local congregations. Thirdly, Calvin's concept of "vestigial congregations" introduces yet another conceptual distinction into the argument. Fourth, Calvin's primary focus was in renewing the church by renewing local congregations in areas under the control of the reformers, in his case the Genevan church. Finally, Calvin and the other reformers were living in a revolutionary age and were in the midst of changes even they could not comprehend as the church left the Middle Ages. So, it is no wonder that they did not anticipate questions that would arise at a later time, 500 years the future, in another revolutionary age .our own.

Any application of Calvin's thought in the context of a modern mainline denomination in twenty-first century America must proceed carefully. Calvin was aware that the Roman Church was not the only ecclesiastical body to which local churches were related. He was aware of the Roman Church, the Eastern Churches, and of the small Protestant bodies in Northern Europe. The Genevan church was in fact confessionally and governmentally separated from Rome by choice and from the Eastern Orthodox Churches by history. Yet, Calvin had no idea that he was creating a new kind of religious structure that would evolve into a modern denomination. To the extent that an application of his teaching can be made, it is likely that he would think of modern denominations as standing in somewhat the same relationship with their local churches as local Western churches did with Rome in the sixteenth century. But, one cannot be sure. Therefore, one ought to be careful of an overly simplistic analysis or application of Calvin's thought.

Though the Roman Church might not be a true church, certain local congregations possessed the marks of the true church of Christ and constituted vestiges of the true church in the midst of a larger body. It oversimplifies Calvin to reduce his thinking, as some have done, to a simple equation by which a body is determined to be either a true or false church, with a decision concerning whether or not a relationship should be severed determined by the resulting determination. Calvin is a more sophisticated analyst than such an equation permits. A decision that the marks of the true church have become effaced might justify separation. But the facts might require that the local congregation remain as a vestigial witness in a defective body and as a force for renewal of the whole body. Alternatively,

separation *might* be justified. Between these two extremes, other options could be developed.<sup>30</sup>

3. *Relational Distance in Defective Churches* One of the difficulties in understanding Calvin's attitude toward what amounts to separation of one form or another is that the reformers did not perceive that they were creating "new churches" or the forerunners of modern denominations, although that is what they were in fact doing. They perceived they were renewing and restoring the one Church of Jesus Christ. For Calvin, confessional and governmental distancing of some kind is a reaction of a true church which finds itself in need of removing itself from a defective body in order to maintain its purity as a church of Jesus Christ. The Genevan church had distanced itself theologically and politically from Rome and Roman governance as a result of the inadequacies of the Roman Church. For Calvin, this was the practical effect of the emergence of a renewed church, separated from a defective body. Calvin did not think that he was in schism from the church. Instead, he felt that the true church was emerging from a corrupt church to renew and restore it.<sup>31</sup>

#### PART 4: THE TRAINING AND DISCIPLINE OF PASTORS

The training and placement of clergy are of utmost importance for the future of any church. Most congregational members view their pastors not only as "theologians in residence," but also as examples of Christian character for themselves, their families, and community members. It is foreign to a Reformed understanding of the nature of the pastorate that moral standards either not exist or be administered by every local governing body as each sees fit. This would, as one renewal group leader observed, return us to the time of the judges when "there was no king in Israel, and everyone in Israel did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Calvin shared a deep and abiding interest in the clergy, their formation, and their moral integrity.

1. *Offices of the Church and their Tasks.* The basic offices of the church, for Calvin, are teaching elders (pastors) and teachers, for the ministry of the Word; ruling elders, for the maintenance of morals; and deacons, for the care of the poor (4.4.1).<sup>32</sup> The office of bishop evolved when one teaching elder was necessary to report on business, counsel other leaders,

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<sup>30</sup> If my analysis is correct, Calvin would allow for various responses to the current crisis in the mainline churches. Renewal groups might contemplate "Stay and Fight," "Gracious Separation," the various "Two Synod Proposals," or other options that have been proposed by renewal leaders in the PC(USA), with theological incoherence depending on the circumstances.

<sup>31</sup> The real question is not "Which option is schismatic?" but instead, "Which of the various options allows the maintenance of a distinctive, faithful Reformed presence for affected congregations?" For Calvin, that question would inevitably lead to the question, "Which of the options will allow best for the Word to be purely preached, the sacraments to be rightly administered, and discipline properly maintained?"

<sup>32</sup> See, John Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, "Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances," John Baille, John P. McNeill, Henry P. Van Dusen, ed. J.K.S. Reid, tr. Vol. XXII (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1944), 58. Calvin outlines four offices as essential to a rightly ordered church: pastors, doctors, elders and deacons.

request opinions and govern the whole (4.4.2).<sup>33</sup> In Geneva, Calvin created a Consistory containing the teaching pastors and twelve ruling elders into whose hands were placed the government of the church.<sup>34</sup> The four offices are each intended to perform a function within the body of Christ. It is the duty of pastors to preach the Word and administer the sacraments. It is the duty of doctors to teach the Word. It is the duty of ruling elders to provide for the governance and discipline of the church. It is the duty of deacons to provide for the caring ministries of the church.<sup>35</sup>

2. *Doctrinal and Moral Training of Pastors.* Calvin recognizes that, from the earliest times, the leaders of the church took under care youths to be prepared for the pastoral office (4.4.9). The purpose of this training was that "from early youth under sacred instruction and strict training they took on an exemplary life of gravity and holiness; and separated from worldly cares they became accustomed to spiritual cares and studies" (4.4.9). Before such persons were admitted into the office of pastor, they were weighed as to their "merits and morals" in common council with the lay people of the church (4.4.10). Examination was made both as to the doctrine and the morals of the person to be ordained (4.4. 14). Thus, for Calvin, there were to be both characterological and theological requirements for church leadership.

One of Calvin's most trenchant critiques of the Roman Church is the way in which the requirements for ordination to leadership had been corrupted. In one passage he says:

This is certain, that for a hundred years scarcely one man in a hundred has been elected who has comprehended anything of sacred learning. I spare the previous centuries not because they were much better, but because our question concerns only the current church. If their morals are appraised, we shall find few or almost none whom the ancient canons would not have judged unworthy (4.5.1).

Thus, Calvin would have opposed ordination of those whose doctrine or morals were found unworthy. It is Calvin's view that:

[O]nly those are to be chosen who are of sound doctrine and of holy life, not notorious in any fault which might both deprive them of authority and disgrace the ministry. The very same requirements apply to deacons and presbyters. We must always see to it that they be adequate and fit to bear the burden imposed on them, that is that they be instructed in the skills necessary for the discharge of their office (4.3.12).

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<sup>33</sup> For Calvin, "The first task of the bishop's office is to teach the people from God's word. The second and next is to administer the sacraments. The third is to admonish and exhort, also to correct those who sin and to keep the people under holy discipline" (4.7.23). Thus, the primary duty of bishops is to maintain the marks of the church inviolate.

<sup>34</sup> Justo Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity: Reformation to the Present Day* Vol. 2. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), 67.

<sup>35</sup> Donald Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology: Life Ministry and Hope* Vol. 2. (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1982).

The Roman Church had failed in a central task: training and providing leadership for the church. The renewal of the church would require first and foremost a renewed and restored leadership.

In order for Christian leaders to be able to know God and do God's will, they must be involved in worship, devotion, and holy living and actively sharing the love of God with others. They must indwell and embody the narrative by which Christians are to live and within which they form their lives and modes of understanding.<sup>36</sup> As mainline denominations face decisions concerning the training and ordination of pastors, one wonders if the same critique that Calvin makes of the decline of the Roman Church is not at least partially applicable to our situation. It is difficult to see how a denomination can continue in its current form if it ignores doctrine and morals as criteria for ordination. In the absence of agreed upon standards of morals and learning for pastors, the church is doomed to a divided, fractious clergy and a dispirited laity. Even the presbytery system would seem to be flawed if it cannot see to the maintenance of standards for clergy, since this is its first and primary reason for existence.<sup>37</sup>

For Calvin, nothing is more dangerous to the church than the decline of its teaching ministry. In the New Testament, the apostles warned that false teachers would appear (4.9.4). Thus, it is necessary that pastors be judged, recognizing that many teach false doctrines, "singing the same song that those once sang who were fighting against God's Word" (4.9. 5). Just as individual pastors can and have erred, so also assemblies of pastors (councils) have also erred (4.9.7). Just as individual pastors must be judged against Scripture, so councils and other gatherings of pastors must be "examined by the standard of Scripture" (4.9.8). Those who turn out to be false prophets should not be obeyed or heeded (4.9.12). Indeed, the first and most important duty of the "doctors" of the church is "the instruction of the faithful in true doctrine, in order that the purity of the gospel be not corrupted either by ignorance or by evil opinions."<sup>38</sup>

It is important that clergy possess both solid Biblical and doctrinal training and a moral character consistent with the Judeo-Christian tradition. Intellectual virtues can be developed in an academic environment. Practical virtues, such as faith, hope and love, can be developed only by participating in a community characterized by these virtues. It is likely that the current loss of moral consensus in mainline denominations is a result of a prior disintegration of the kind of community that would sustain such a consensus.

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<sup>36</sup> The notion of leadership as essentially an indwelling is adapted from the work of Michael Polanyi. See Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 60.

<sup>37</sup> One of the most urgent needs in mainline congregations concerns the need for clear standards for the preparation of pastors and a restoration of the teaching office of the church. Modern scholarship is hostile to the idea that there exists in the text of Scripture a recognizable system of doctrine and morals. Increasingly, there are those who believe that it is impossible to discern such a system in Scripture. So, pluralism of doctrine and morals reigns. The lack of doctrinal and moral consensus makes training and examining pastors who embody a common set of theological and moral skills a near impossibility - for there is no agreement as to what kind of character we are seeking in candidates for ministry.

<sup>38</sup> Calvin, *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, op. cit., 62.

4. *Clergy as Related to the Church.* Another abuse Calvin vehemently opposes is the practice of ordination free of pastoral obligations. For Calvin, "there should be no ordinations free of pastoral obligations, that is, that a place be assigned to the person ordained where he is to exercise his office" (4.5.4). Such an ordination is to be to a church, for "the ordination of a presbyter is a call to govern the church" (4.5.5). Calvin proceeds to critique the practice of the Roman Church, which substantially undermined the Chalcedon doctrine (see, 4.5.6-12). It is a mark of the decline of the Roman Church, writes Calvin, that clergy "have cast off as burdens too troublesome the preaching of the Word, the care of discipline, and the administering of sacraments" (4.5.10).

Some mainline churches have ordained large numbers of special clergy whose ministries are unconnected to local congregations. These specialized clergy often lack the connection with local congregations that is often important for informed judgments where the impact of decisions on local congregations is an important consideration. Calvin's notion that ordained pastors ought to be connected to a local congregation was penned before the rise of counseling, chaplaincy and other specialized clerical offices. Revision of our polity to deny ordination except for those serving the church full time may seem to be unfair to the large numbers of specialized clergy who perform important and useful services to many institutions and organizations.

## CONCLUSION

For Calvin, the church is a necessary community because in the church people ordinarily come to faith in Christ and have their faith nurtured. The local church, in which people come to faith and grow as disciples, is the primary aspect of the visible community of Christian believers, and it should be respected and revered. This visible community is made up of all those who profess to worship God as revealed in Christ. Like any organization, the external membership undoubtedly contains many whose faith is questionable. Thus, there is another church of which it is possible to speak. This is the invisible church made up of all those who truly believe in Christ. This church is spread all over the earth in local congregations in which the word is preached, the sacraments administered, and proper behavior is maintained. The local congregation is but a part of the world wide body of Christ.

The foundation of any ecclesial system is, and must be, these local communities of faith in which worship is maintained, people are disciplined and the virtues of faith, hope and love are nurtured and developed. Other ecclesiastical structures are necessary and desirable, but they gain their reason for existence as they assist the ministry of the local congregation and make possible larger and more effective ministries in which local congregations participate. A properly organized structure must take into consideration the importance of nurturing and supporting local communities of faith, and it is from local churches that they receive legitimacy.

At the foundation of a properly formed Christian community is the apostolic witness taught and preached in a form appropriate for the congregation. So too, the sacraments and other practices of the faithful must be maintained in conformity with the canonical script provided by Scripture and the tradition within which the local congregation operates. Because we are fallen and fallible creatures, some kind of spiritual discipline must be

provided so that faith and practice will not be corrupted. What Presbyterians call governing bodies are a part of a properly formed system of polity and discipline.

No age is without connection to that which preceded it, and in designing structures it is not sufficient to build unreflectively on the Bible and present perceived needs. The long history and tradition of the church and of those congregations that are part of the Reformed tradition is an important component of the designing process. The future is likely to be an adaptation to the present, not a radical change. This is not congenial to the modern, revolutionary mind-set. But it is in keeping with a wise humility. That is why in this article I have chosen to focus on the “font” of Reformed theology, such as that of Calvin, and to return to the source of our heritage, which ensures our building wisely on the foundations laid for us by those who went before us.

The history of Israel, the Gospels, and the witness of the early church give us other clues to the kind of relational polity that would resonate with Presbyterians. It will involve the office of elder and the primacy of preaching and teaching the Word of God by those called apart to minister in the name of Christ. It will involve the governing of local congregations by sessions, as well as a relational connectionalism by which local congregations submit to and partner with one another in ministry and accountability. This relational connectionalism will be centered in Christ and in the Biblical witness to Christ.

What is needed at this juncture is a more relational, “bottom up” connectional polity – a polity founded on commonalities of faith, theology, and practice. Such a polity will take seriously the primacy of the local congregation. It will consciously preserve and promote the independence and vitality of local congregations. Connectional bodies will see themselves as primarily “servants” of the interests of like-minded local congregations. This does not mean that theological and moral issues will be less important. Nor does it mean that maintenance of standards will cease to be important.

This brief analysis points to three characteristics that a well-formed, post-modern Reformed church polity should incorporate:

1. A post-modern church will be Trinitarian and Christocentric – a particular part of the larger universal body of Christ.
2. A post-modern church will be relational as opposed to bureaucratic, and will place its priority on the interests of the local congregation.
3. A post-modern church will be Biblical in its structure and polity.

What we call “higher governing bodies” in the PC(USA) came into existence to meet the needs of earlier generations of Presbyterians, first in Scotland, then in the United States of America. Originally, ordination of pastors was the primary duty of what was then called the “higher courts” of the church. The initial institutional structures have evolved into the bureaucratic denominational structures of today. As the modern era, with its focus on size, bureaucratic efficiency and administrative control draws to a close, there is a need for

different structures, and some of the structures we now have may need to be eliminated or drastically changed.<sup>39</sup>

It might be well to dispense entirely with the term "governing body" and replace it with the term "servant organization". This would enshrine in our polity the kind of servant-leadership structure that we often urge upon our pastors and local congregational leaders.<sup>40</sup> "Servant structures" are always adapted to the needs of those being served, in this case local congregations. The structures a renewed polity would entail, and the precise form structures would take, are beyond the scope of this article. Whatever their nature, such structures need to be consciously designed, after deliberate reflection on the Scriptures, to meet the needs of the local entities through which they are formed and by which they are sustained. One of the Biblical perspectives that needs to be enshrined in our polity flows from its service to the one who "came not to be served, but to serve" (Matt. 20:28).

The task of adapting to the vast cultural changes is not a simple one. Those whose livelihoods and life commitments are challenged by the need for change will not find it easy to alter the way they perceive reality or the church. But it is an important task. Mainline churches owe it to the generations of faithful members to find ways to faithfully carry their witness into the new culture now forming in the West. It is my hope that this article can be a part of this adaptation.

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<sup>39</sup> It is my view that the structures that evolved in the late 19th and 20th centuries were appropriate for a corporate and bureaucratic era. They accomplished many wonderful things and were instrumental in many positive changes in the church and in our society. The key is to see that such structures are "in accordance with the word of God" and aptly designed for our era.

<sup>40</sup> So often, denominational leaders lose sight of the important fact that the larger body cannot act in ways that significant numbers of local bodies find incompatible with their faith without injuring the relational health of the church. Higher bodies cannot "legislate" unity, for their existence and unity is based upon a deeper relational unity at the level of the local congregations. Unity is not fundamental. It is the result of other relational features, such as good teaching and discipling. This same relational principle is operative at the congregational level. The relational health of the local congregation depends on the health of families, Sunday School Classes, Bible studies, small groups, and ministry groups, all of whom must be nurtured and grow for the local congregation to be healthy. Where substantial numbers of local congregations disagree and are alienated from other organizational structures, governing bodies cannot fulfill their servant role in assisting and strengthening the local congregations. They simply lack the sympathetic understanding and legitimacy required. The result is conflict, alienation and decline.